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ABSTRACT

Reactions of men and women to failure in sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate tasks were examined through performance records, self-ratings of learning progress, and attributions of performance to effort and ability. Fear of success studies show that individuals may avoid success where success is sex-inappropriate. It was thought that failure might not be so bad if the task was sex-innappropriate anyway. Results show this. Both men and women suffered less impairment in actual performance after failure feedback when they thought their task was sex-inappropriate. However, only women absorbed the failure message, as indicated by self-ratings of progress in learning. The sex difference is examined in terms of sex-differentiated use of the attribution process. (Author)

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How Failure Strikes Men and Women

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How Failure Strikes Men and Women

The work on women's fear of success has now received about as much attention, revision, reinterpretation, and criticism as such a recent body of research could hope (or fear) to receive (Tresemer, 1976; Zuckerman and Wheeler, 1975; Levine and Crumrine, 1975). Reading of these revisions and reinterpretations led us to one substantial conclusion--that women's "fear of success" might not reflect so much a wish to avoid success as a wish to avoid violating sex-role expectations. In this, women's views on successful women are not unlike the views of men--they think there is a strong possibility that women who succeed where at least some men do not may be regarded as unattractive, immoral, and dissatisfied (Monahan, Kuhn, and Shaver, 1974). It may be, therfore, not a fear of success but a fear that the fruits of success may not be altogether desirable that gives pause.

Further, how about men's "fear of success?" Do men also shrink from performing well at tasks thought to be appropriate for women? Or have recent trends brought about increases in men's fear of success in general, so that they now too will shrink from excellent performance of any task?

Finally, what is the effect of success on men's or women's actual performance? Do men or women, or perhaps both, actually show poorer performance in the face of success? If they do, does their poorer performance bear any relation to the sex-role appropriateness of the task at hand?

We also were interested in the other side of the question--what happens when men and women fail at tasks which are either sex-appropriate or sex-inappropriate? If success on sex-inappropriate tasks is painful, is failure a pleasure? Or does it at least not disrupt performance on that task, and perhaps even enhance it? In raising the question, we considered another

body of literature--the attribution research on success and failure. It appears from that work that men and women adopt different explanations for their successes and their failures, and that men's patterns seem to serve them well. When men and boys succeed, they credit their success to their ability; when they fail, they blame their failure on bad luck or insufficient effort (Kukla, 1972 Nicholls, 1975). Girls and women, on the other hand, appear to do themselves in by accepting blame for their failures and taking no credit for success.

The fear of success research has not explored attribution patterns, and the research on attributions has not explored men's and women's handling of success and failure on sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate tasks. We have tried to combine the two traditions. We looked at men's and women's performance in the face of failure, of success, and when no means of judging effectiveness was provided save the person's own expectations of himself or herself. It combines the experience of success or failure with differing orientations to sex-role appropriateness. Thus, men and women were led to believe that they would perform one task which most other members of their own sex could do well, and another usually performed best by members of the opposite sex. As they learned these tasks, we looked at their practice effort, their performance on test trials, their subjective judgments as to how well or how poorly they were doing, and their attributions, or their personal explanations of the causes of good or poor performance of the tasks that they were learning. We thought that failure on sex-inappropriate tasks might be less damaging to both men's and women's performance, and to their reactions to their own performance, than failure on sex-appropriate tasks. And we also thought that while men and women might adopt different explanations for performance and for success

and failure, their explanations might still serve a similar function for both sexes. That is, their explanations might serve to make their behavior appear rational in their own eyes.

PROCEDURE

Subjects. 43 men and 42 women from an undergraduate psychology course took part to fulfill a course requirement. They volunteered to take part in what was described as a study of motor skills.

Design. Two tasks were chosen as experimental learning situations. Both were selected because they provided a possibility for extended improvements in performance which would depend on how long or how effectively subjects practiced. All subjects tried both tasks, the first of which was the pursuit rotor, which in fact is a task often used in experiments on motor learning (Task 1). The second was the labyrinth, the standard game often sold in toy or hobby shops. The object is to roll a steel marble along an irregular path on a tilting platform. The idea is to avoid traps which consist of holes along the path through which the marble can fall (Task 2).

Half of the men and half of the women were led to believe that men could usually learn to perform Task 1 better than women. The pursuit rotor was described as demanding the same kind of visual motor coordination that is important in such common men's games as baseball or basketball, or in activities like hunting. The other half of the men and women were told that women could usually perform Task 1 better than men. They were told that the task measured fine motor skills of the kind called for by jobs women could usually do better than men. The rationales describing the tasks were reversed for all men and women for Task 2, so that all men and women learned one task which they thought members of their own sex performed best and one performed best by members of the opposite sex.

Procedure. E explained and demonstrated each task to each subject, including the comments on how well men or women did on the task in her demonstration. Ss were allowed to practice for a short time on each task, then were interrupted to answer a few questions. They were asked to indicate how well they thought they were doing, and to give their best judgment as to how much performance on the task they were learning depended on luck, ability, effort, task difficulty, or sex.

E then looked over Ss scores during his/her practice and commented on them, telling one third of the members of each sex that theirs was the best score she had seen. Another third of the men or women were told that they had done worse than almost everyone else after an equal amount of practice. The last third of the men and women were interrupted at the same point but E made no comment on their performance. Ss were then allowed to resume practice for as long as they liked, after which they took a final test trial and answered the same questions as before on how well they believed they had done and what made for good performance. Men and women who were told that their performance was best on Task 1 were given to understand that their performance was poorest on Task 2, and vice versa. Men and women who received no success or failure comments on Task 1 received none on Task 2.

Last, E explained the nature of the experiment and made sure that all subjects understood that they had not, in fact, done poorly on either task.

RESULTS

Performance. On Task 1, the only significant effect was a main effect for subject's sex: men performed significantly better than women ($F(1,73) = 7.85$; $p < .01$). While this finding neither supports nor disconfirms our predictions, it is not really interpretable--that is, we do not know whether it arose from the nature of our task or whether it tells us something

about sex differences in general.

On Task 2, we found a triple interaction between subject's sex, sex-labeling of the task, and feedback ($F(2,70) = 3.62$; $p = .032$). Unexpectedly, there were no effects of sex labeling when the feedback was success (See Table 1). Men and women performed equally well after being told that they were good at the task, and it did not matter whether the task had been described as masculine or feminine. The sex labeling of the task did affect performance when men or women received no feedback, however, and it affected men and women the same way. Both did better when they believed the task was sex appropriate (Again, see Table 1). Thus, if we have any evidence that the threat of success impedes performance it is this; both men and women showed the best learning not when they were told that they were doing best, but when they were left to form their own judgement, without knowledge of how well they were doing as compared to others. This was even more true of the men than of the women, and both men and women learned best when they believed they were learning a task most other members of their own sex did well.

Both men and women also reacted to the sex labeling of the task when they were told they were doing poorly. Failure on a masculine task depressed men's performance and failure on a feminine task depressed women's. Failure on a sex-inappropriate task, however, seemed not to bother either men or women; in fact, both men and women continued on to perform as well as they did after success.

Self-Ratings of Performance. Turning from actual performance records to men's and women's self ratings of how well they thought they were doing, we found that women described themselves as doing less well than did the

men on both Task 1 and Task 2 even before receiving feedback (F (1, 79) = 5.21; p= .026). E's remarks on the goodness or poorness of S's progress produced further differences, with failure being reacted to by markedly lower self ratings at the end of the task, at least on the part of the women (F (2, 73) = 4.76; p = .012) (See Table 2). The interaction between sex and feedback was also significant on Task 1, with men showing as positive opinions of their performance after negative feedback as when no comment was made, and the highest opinions after success, while women showed no enhancement in their self-ratings after success, but very low self ratings after failure (F (2, 73) = 3.49; p = .036). A similar pattern appeared on Task 2, with the exception that men showed a somewhat greater effect of negative feedback, but the strongest effect of failure was still shown by the women, who again showed no positive effect of success.

Attributions. All subjects had been asked to judge both tasks in terms of the extent to which effort, ability, luck, task difficulty, or sex accounted for performance differences. Significant interactions between sex and changes in attribution patterns after feed back appeared for two of these--effort and ability--on Task 1. These differences were such that the men lowered the emphasis they placed on natural ability if they experienced failure. Women, in contrast, lowered attributions to natural ability after success but increased them after failure (F (2, 72) = 3.29; p = .043). Attributions to effort shifted in an opposite manner for both sexes. Men lowered their attributions to effort if they experienced success, but increased them if they experienced failure. Women again did the converse; attributions of performance to effort were increased after success but reduced after failure (F (2, 72) = 3.14; p = .049).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Both men and women showed poorer learning of a motor skill if their performance was criticized, but only if they believed other members of their own sex could usually do well at their task. Both men and women learned better when no comments were made on their learning progress than when they were told they were doing best, again only if they believed others of their own sex could usually do well. Having a task described as something the opposite sex usually did better seemed to serve as a built in rationale which could attenuate the effects of criticism.

2. Men and women differed in their method of assimilating information about their own performance and in their uses of it in making judgments about their own ability.

3. Men employed a defensive pattern of attribution in which success seemed to them to result from high ability, but failure seemed to result from insufficient effort. Such a pattern promotes the maintenance of high self-esteem and permits the denial of negative information on skills and abilities. It is also a hopeful strategy, in that a promise of future success can be maintained even in the face of failure if task perceptions are altered in such a way that the task is seen as responsive to intensified effort.

4. Women did not employ the same kind of defensive cognitive strategy as the men. Instead, they accepted and believed the criticism and actually magnified the extent to which they attributed performance to poor ability after failure. Women's most positive ratings of their own performance were given when neither praise nor criticism had been offered by the experimenter.

Footnotes

1. This study was supported by Contract Number N0014-75-C-0618, Office of Naval Research, Organizational Effectiveness Research Program. We wish to thank Nancy Abolone and Corinne Dieterle for their very able assistance as experimenters and data analysts.

2. Students could choose to participate in any one of a number of studies. All subjects were debriefed at the end of their participation and were informed completely on the nature of the experiment as well as that they had not, in fact, done poorly on either task.